The Equality of Social Envies

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Abstract

Although envy is commonly understood as such a vice that it is listed as one of the seven deadly sins, envy is a site where concerns over inequalities and exploitation are articulated. In addition, although we often correlate envy with the expression of illegitimate resentments, this is not necessarily always the case. Certain forms of envious feelings can be viewed as arising quite legitimately in response to distributive inequalities. However, the moral meanings associated with envy not only impact upon what is discursively possible but also how such sentiments are heard. Thus, judgments of moral worth can effectively silence, rather than open up, concerns around inequalities. Similarly, legitimate expressions about the inequities of distributive justice can be heard as envy talk. In exploring this terrain, this paper draws on the potentiality of social envies to explore lay meanings of classed and gendered inequalities and the emergence of new social resentments.

Keywords

Class, envy, gender, inequality, lay meanings

Introduction

There has been a recent call within sociology for greater attention to be paid to lay meanings of inequalities. For example, Bottero (2004) has drawn attention to the significance of lay meanings in respect of the development of new class theories. Bottero notes how new class theories retain aspects of older theoretical positions. In this respect she reflects on how 'Within new accounts of 'class' as cultural, individualized and implicit, there is still a tendency to look back to older versions of class theory - as collective, explicit and oppositional' (p 987). For Bottero this means that new class theorists fail to make sufficient analytical distinctions between exploitation, as a classed process and resulting from relations of capital, and inequality as an aspect of social relations in the everyday. This gives rise to two problems facing those working in this field. First, how can we account for the continuance, and seeming acceptance, of

inequalities in everyday life? Second, how can we more fully develop understandings of the emergence of collective class identities and class boundaries at specific historical epochs? One answer to these questions is to consider how people themselves understand and discuss inequality, injustice and conflict. Thus, Bottero (2004: 995) comments 'Very real issues of exploitation and conflict arise from patterns of inequality but the discussion of such issues must draw on the language of perceived injustice and conflict which emerges from people themselves.'

Working within theories of the moral economy, Sayer (2003; 2005a and b) has similarly argued that we need to give fuller consideration to lay meanings of class. Sayer's concerns are to illustrate how neglecting the terrain of values and affect from analyses of discourse and socialisation effectively removes an important aspect of sense-making and thus leads to incomplete analyses. His starting point is the discomfort that is produced when people are asked directly about their class position. Sayer argues that this discomfort arises because individuals are being asked to rank their economic and moral worth against others. Such discomfort can be seen in Guymer's (1999) initial resistance to writing an autobiographical account of her middle class experiences. She comments 'When I was asked to write of my experiences of growing up in the privileged classes I accepted reluctantly, for fear of exposing an identity that I have spent many years trying to hide and deconstruct' (p 225).

Sayer (2005a) illustrates the significance of the moral economy through a discussion of shame. Here he demonstrates how this promotes both conformity and resistance to middle class values and how shame is more likely to be experienced when actors draw on individualistic explanations for social inequalities. Arguing for the significance of lay meaning for exploring the moral sphere, Sayer comments 'If we are to understand the significance of class we need to take lay normativity, especially morality, much more seriously than sociology has tended to do; without this we are likely to produce bland, alienated accounts which fail to make sense of why class is a matter of concern and embarrassment to people' (p 948). Indeed, Sayer (2003: 2) goes so far as to argue that 'egalitarian ideas will never gain much influence in popular thinking' unless we engage with the diverse and complex range of lay moral sentiments that are used to evaluate how people treat each other in the economic sphere.

With a focus on gender, Lam (2004:6) presents an empirical account of 'why people's attitudes to social inequalities seldom correlate with the material facts of their own position'. Accordingly Lam is also concerned with a focus on lay meaning as she argues that 'Empiricists often overlook the precise principles ordinary people use or their application to specific situations' (p 8). Lam's guiding theme is to explore why, and indeed whether, individuals acquiesce to gendered inequalities. Lam's analysis produces three typologies. These are endorsers, opponents and accommodators. Overall, her research indicates that respondents use the principles of equality or differentiation to legitimize or de-legitimize unequal opportunities. In this respect, the principle of equality refers to liberalism's conception of equality as the 'same as' or identical. The principle of differentiation refers to a more essentialist assumption of innate differences between the sexes. Thus:

> *Endorsers underestimated gender inequality using the principle of differentiation. Opponents who were discontented with inequality in numerous instances held the principle of equality between the sexes. Accommodating respondents shifted between the principles of differentiation and equality to evaluate different situations. (Lam, 2004: 21)*

Lam's analysis is exceptionally helpful in demonstrating the range of ways in which individual's perceive issues of justice in everyday life. For example, opponents not only sought equality in the sphere of employment but also extended their concerns to beauty contests, pornographic films and magazines that they viewed as forms of violence that demeaned women. Endorsers, on the other hand, did not believe that they had experienced any gender inequality in their lives viewing any differences as a consequence of innate sexual difference. Those whom Lam identified as accommodating respondents took a mixed view. Thus, they believed in gender equality in the workplace but could accept differential treatment in the family. This seemingly contradictory position was 'accommodated' through the use of 'different principles for evaluating situations' (Lam, 2004: 18)

These concerns with lay meanings and inequalities are central to this paper. There are, however, aspects of this terrain that prompt greater interrogation and in this regard Lam, in particular, provides a helpful stepping stone to facilitate this exploration. Specifically, two, seemingly contradictory, findings from Lam are used in this paper to further enquire into the potential of lay meaning and the moral economy in respect of class and gender inequalities. These are, first, Lam's findings that none of her respondents found income inequalities between women and men to be a source of discontent. Second is the unifying belief amongst her respondents in equal opportunities.

In this paper, these two aspects of Lam's empirical data are analysed through the conceptual frame of social envies. Although envy is commonly understood as such a vice that it is listed as one of the seven deadly sins, envy is, of course, a site where concerns over inequalities and exploitation are articulated. In addition, although we often correlate envy with the expression of illegitimate resentments, this is not necessarily always the case. Thus, 'certain sorts of envious feelings can be more plausibly seen as an understandable *consequence* of social arrangements which take insufficient account of defensible principles of distributive justice … resentment may be a legitimate reaction to circumstances in which social justice is denied' (Ahier and Beck, 2003: 324).

This paper develops Lam's analysis by drawing on research in education. Barry (2005: 47) indicates how important education is in the achievement of social justice by proposing that 'we should regard the demands of social justice as being met to the extent that there are equal educational attainments at the age of 18'. Ahier and Beck further comment on how education and educational reform have 'often been seen as one of the most important means through which the socially divisive effects of social envy can be mitigated or even overcome. Indeed, envy arising from perceived unjust inequalities of educational opportunity has been seen by many as a paradigm instance of where the sentiment of envy may in some sense be *legitimate'* (p 323). In consequence, the first

part of this paper is concerned to demonstrate how the conceptual frame of social envies can draw our attention to potential discontent. Whilst, therefore, Lam's respondents demonstrated no concern over income inequality, Ahier and Beck argue that new forms of social resentment are being formed around income inequalities amongst university educated young people.

The second part of the paper seeks to demonstrate the salience of class and gender in the moral terrain of envy in respect of the assessment of justified resentments. This can be summed up in the question 'Who is judged as envious?' Whilst Lam's respondents may be heard as expressing non-envious and legitimate views in their universal belief in equal opportunities, the terminology of a politics of envy reminds us of the classed based nature of contestation over distributive justice. The analysis here, therefore, draws on the association of envy with a desire not for equality of opportunity but for equality of outcome. Equality of outcome, as Phillips (2004) notes, is considered by many social egalitarians to be economic and social madness. This is because it is so strongly associated, as is envy, with leveling down and the denial of difference. Given the positioning of the working classes in the moral pecking order, this part of the paper takes up these concerns to argue that judgments of moral worth can both effectively silence and legitimate, rather than open up, concerns around inequalities.

The concluding section returns more generally to the theme of lay meaning and the analysis of envy.

Envy: A Social Good?

The central rationale of Lam's paper is to explore the everyday meanings of equality amongst a group of young, middle class, women in Hong Kong. In this respect, Sayer (2003) reminds us of the importance of the moral economy to developing understandings of lay normativity. Sayer defines the moral economy as the 'norms which govern or should govern economic activity' (p1) and 'the ways in which economic activities are influenced or constrained to some degree by moral considerations' (ibid). With assumptions about its socially destructive nature, envy comes high on the list of forms of moral judgment. Schoeck (1969) devotes an entire thesis to exploring, mainly negative, conceptions of envy. These include proverbs, such as 'Envy sees only the bridge, not the swamp it crosses' (p 21), envy in fiction and philosophical, political and psychological perspectives on envy through the work of, for example, Kant, Smith, Marx and Freud. Referring to the work of Merton, Schoeck also indicates how sociology in the 1960s seemingly sidestepped the recognition of envy in society by preferring to use the term 'hostile feelings'. Sabini and Silver (1986: 179) also comment on the tendency to view envy as a sin in terms that it becomes a ‘characterization of a person that is grounded in particulars of his [sic] behaviour and experience’.

These negative associations are, to some extent, rescued by Rawls (1971; 1999) in his conception of justice as fairness. Certainly Rawls views envy as a negative trait such that 'A rational [sic] individual is not subject to envy' (p 464). He also strongly rejects a moral view of envy because of its normative associations. Rather, Rawls prefers a

psychological analysis in order to demonstrate how envy is a universal trait. Such universalism can be found in Klein's (1957) object relations account of envy. In exploring the psychoanalytic effects of envy Klein is concerned with the ways that it restricts the individual's capacity for happiness and gratitude. In particular, Klein lays stress on the 'spoiling and destructive quality of envy in so far as it interferes with the building up of a secure relation to the good external and internal object, undermines the sense of gratitude, and in many ways blurs the distinction between good and bad' (Klein, 1957: 85).

Klein defines envy as 'the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable – the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it' (p 6) and comments that in normal development envy will remain a universal aspect of personality but this will not be especially problematic. However, in those cases where there are strongly disturbed relations with the 'primal good object' (p 6), which for Klein is the mother's breast, the destructive effects of excessive envy can arise:

> *for the infant feels that it [the breast] possesses everything he desires and that it has an unlimited flow of milk and love which the breast keeps for its own gratification. This feeling adds to his sense of grievance and hate, and the result is a disturbed relation to the mother. If envy is excessive, this … indicates that paranoid and schizoid features are abnormally strong and that such an infant can be regarded as ill' (Klein, 1957:10).*

Rawls attention to the psychological aspects of envy arises from a concern to ensure that his theory of justice can withstand the impact of what he refers to as 'certain psychological propensities' (p 464). Rawls views envy, or certainly too much of the wrong kind of envy in a society, as both a vice and potentially socially dangerous. He distinguishes between social and individual envy through the use of the terms general and particular envy. General envy arises when those with less, envy those with more. Rawls uses the example of envy of upper class wealth and opportunity here. Particular envy is 'typical of rivalry and competition' (p 466) and occurs when, for example, a colleague receives promotion or a love rival succeeds where you have not. Given Rawls believes that envy is a universal psychological trait, Rawls effectively argues that particular envy will always occur and, unpalatable as it is, nothing can be done about it. It is, therefore, general envy that is of specific concern to Rawls because he believes it can lead to leveling down effects. Drawing on the Kantian view that envy is one of the vices of hating mankind, Rawls comments:

> *…we may think of envy as the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though their being more fortunate than we are does not detract from our advantages. We envy persons whose situation is superior to ours … and we are willing to deprive them of their greater benefits even if it is necessary to give up something ourselves … So understood envy is collectively disadvantageous: the individual who envies another is prepared to do things that make them both worse off, if only the discrepancy between them is sufficiently reduced. (p 466)*

Rawls refers to this form of envy as rancorous envy. It is 'envy proper … that tends to harm both its object and its subject' (p 467). However, Rawls makes further conceptual distinctions that indicate that not all forms of envy should be viewed either as a vice or as potentially socially destructive. Some may have no social effects, or relatively few and some may actually be socially beneficial. Thus, Rawls distinguishes between benign and emulative envy. Benign envy occurs when, for example, we envy someone's happiness or good fortune but we do not bear then any ill will. Emulative envy is viewed as socially beneficial as it can act as a motivator and so push people to achieve those things that are the objects of their envy.

It is, however, 'excusable envy' that Rawls suggests is a legitimate form of envy. Excusable envy occurs when there is a considerable disparity in the distribution of key primary goods (liberty, opportunity, income, wealth and self-respect) such that the arousal of envious feelings is understandable. He comments:

> *… sometimes the circumstances evoking envy are so compelling that given human beings as they are no one can reasonably be asked to overcome his [sic] rancorous feelings. A person's lesser position as measured by the index of objective primary goods may be so great as to wound his self-respect; and given his situation, we may sympathize with his sense of loss. Indeed, we can resent being made envious, for society may permit such large disparities in these goods that under existing social conditions these differences cannot help but cause a loss of self-esteem. For those suffering this hurt, envious feelings are not irrational: the satisfaction of their rancor would make them better off. When envy is a reaction to the loss of self-respect in circumstances where it would be unreasonable to expect someone to feel differently, I shall say that it is excusable. (p 468).*

It is this aspect of envy that Ahier and Beck (2003) take up in their analysis of the potential emergence of new forms of social antagonism as it points to the legitimacy of envy in circumstances where social justice has been denied. However, because of the negative connotations that accompany the term envy, Ahier and Beck argue that a more accurate description would be justified resentment. I turn now to Ahier and Beck's analysis to demonstrate the potential of envy as a framework for developing understandings of the emergence of new forms of social discontent.

Justified Resentment and the Emergence of New Social Antagonisms

There is something of a note of surprise in Lam's comments that none of her respondents identified income inequalities as a source of discontent. However, the emergence of social antagonism around income inequality is the central feature of Ahier and Beck's analysis. The analytic distinction between these two papers is that Lam is focused on inter-sex inequalities of income whilst Ahier and Beck are concerned with intra-class inequalities of income. This point is important because it points to the relevance of social proximity in the development of resentments and envy. For example, Sabini and Silver’s

(1986: 179) social constructionist approach points to the importance of studying envy in terms of ‘how individuals interpret and react to social comparability’.

The starting point of Ahier and Beck's analysis is how New Labour politics both ignore, and potentially deflect, the rise of social antagonisms. For example, McRobbie (2000: 102) explores New Labour's retreat from feminism and socialism through its take up of Giddens' 'Third Way' proposals. She notes how Giddens' analysis has little to say about power struggle or conflict and in its focus on the excluded in society draws attention away from the consequences, and responsibilities, of national and international capitalism. In terms of gender politics, therefore, 'The Third Way offers a conflict-free version of New Labour politics made attractive to the electorate and to 'ordinary women' (McRobbie, 2000: 102).

Similarly, Avis (2000) notes how the progressive potential of New Labour policy is compromised by the acceptance of capitalist relations. Certainly, as Avis notes, the 'language of inclusion, social cohesion and increased participation has a resonance with social democratic notions' (p 196). However, there remains a:

> *deep silence and refusal of social antagonism - gone is a serious understanding of exploitation at the site of waged labour and an interrogation of the way in which these features are accented through the articulation of race, class and gender. The New Labour project whilst claiming an interest in social inclusion and cohesion with its re-working of equal opportunity does so on a terrain that discounts social antagonism and exploitation (p 190).*

Ahier and Beck (2003) concur that a silence surrounds any recognition of social antagonism in New Labour ideology and policy. They comment on how 'policy development and implementation increasingly proceeds as though the political representation of resentments in now quite outmoded, even if it is accepted that some residual inequalities of opportunity remain' (Ahier and Beck, 2003: 327). In addition, Ahier and Beck point out how New Labour policies also maintain the conditions for this silence. This is because they undermine the potential for any of the comparisons necessary to recognise and challenge social inequalities. For example, under the guise of choice, educational markets are based on an increasing individualisation of choices through the proliferation of different providers, assessment forms and so forth. Students are similarly differentiated in this market and consequently group comparisons become virtually impossible. Differences are seen as the result of individual choices and talents as in the ways that many of Lam's respondents understood the social world.

Notwithstanding, Ahier and Beck (2003) do indicate the potential emergence of new social resentments. Ahier and Beck's research explores the possibilities for social antagonism in higher education amongst the educationally successful. A key area where social resentment arose was in terms of the pay rewards consequent upon graduation. Here those who were planning a career in lower paid forms of work such as local government and NGOs expressed social resentment towards those who were planning to go into high paying jobs in the financial markets of the City of London. This was

particularly the case when there were differential rewards, by job, for the same degree. For example, one respondent commented:

> *At the moment I've got quite a few friends who are doing Computer Science and they think they're quite good. … But I think they, particularly at the moment, are benefiting from university big time because they can go on to earn ridiculous amounts of money straight away and I do find myself getting really resentful of some of them. And they think I'm doing a really easy job (teaching) so I deserve to not be earning as much as them. … They seem to be able to justify their earnings very easily - because they're making so much money for their companies … and I'm just teaching children. So that's something that really gets my back up. (Lydia, quoted in Ahier and Beck, 2003: 333)*

In setting up a dynamic of self-others, these respondents engaged in moral distancing by portraying their personal employment choices as socially right-minded and, indeed, socially necessary. Thus, moral judgments were made about what was perceived to be the excessive pay of 'high flyer' jobs and the associated meanings of this excessive pay both in terms of its social effects and what it said about those who sought such rewards. These moral judgments included critiquing the materialism associated with working in the financial sector and the predominance of self-interest on the part of those seeking such employment. At the heart of the resentment of these respondents was the belief that educational qualifications did not legitimate such considerable differences of reward. This was because their experiences of university had exposed them to the relative hardships that are a consequence of the demise of student grants and the variable abilities of parents to provide necessary funding and so disclosing the arbitrariness of inequality.

Central to the framework that Ahier and Beck were drawing on was the notion of a comparative reference group. In this respect, Schoeck (1969: 195) notes how 'the objects of our envy are generally those who are almost our equals'. Thus, Runciman's (1966) study of social attitudes to inequality demonstrated how it is the existence of a comparative reference group combined with the broader social context that facilitates, or otherwise, deep feelings of envy or resentment. As Lam's research respondents demonstrated in their refusal to be concerned about gendered income inequalities, this is because 'objective' inequality is in itself insufficient to arouse deep discontent Indeed, as economists have pointed out, widening income differentials can in fact lead to less social antagonism rather than more (see for example Podder, 1998). Thus, in contrast to Lam, whose respondents were drawn from a 'non-random theoretical sample' (p10), Ahier and Beck's respondents shared a common situation in terms of making career decisions at the end of their university studies and were able to make direct comparisons with other students on their courses.

However, whilst these notions of social proximity may be relevant to the rise, or otherwise, of envy, such feelings are still commonly understood to be the result of individual experiences and as such remain part of how people perceive the private and personal. Indeed, Ahier and Beck are keen to stress the tentative nature of their findings in that there are several further conditions necessary in terms of politicisation and

amplification before income inequalities of this kind could become the focus of collective social antagonism and mobilization.

One area where mobilization remains highly problematic is in terms of the moral assumptions of envy as a personal and social ill. Thus, although Ahier and Beck's concerns are directed towards the redemptive qualities of envy as a form of justified resentment, this remains far from the meanings of envy in the everyday. As Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine (2003: 291) comment in respect of their research into working class entry into higher education, 'envy [is] such a negative emotion that few will give voice to it'. In order to explore the implications of this more fully I turn to the unspeakabilty of envy as an aspect of the classed implications of the envied and envier's differential moral positioning.

The Unspeakability of Envy

One of the common unifying aspects of Lam's analysis is a belief amongst her respondents in equal opportunities. We should not be surprised that this is the case given that it is central to the rights based egalitarianism that is not only marked in popular consciousness but underwrites social egalitarian policies internationally. In this respect, therefore, such is its embedded correctness that speaking out for equality of opportunity is unlikely to be seen as evidence of envious intentions. Certainly, there remain pockets of machismo conservatism that still argues that women should stay at the kitchen sink. Notwithstanding, research demonstrates the growth of a *belief*, if not the practice, in gender equality of opportunity across both sexes (Hughes, 2004; Pilcher, 1999; Press and Townsley, 1998).

It is those who pursue equality of outcome who are regarded as pursuing envious intentions. Thus, Phillips (2004:1) notes how 'In both academic and popular discourse, the pursuit of outcome equality has been regarded as a politics of envy, an attack on anyone whose aspirations or achievements stray above a supposed norm'. This seemingly automatic association of envious feelings towards those with more can be seen in the summary Hawthorne (1999) provides, albeit somewhat tongue in cheek, of social stratification in Australia. She notes:

> *The upper class is despised, although their wealth and lifestyle is envied; the working class "battler" is glorified, although no one wants to be one; the middle class is considered boring, but most belong to it. (p 199)*

Historically, a politics of envy has been closely associated with old class politics. In his discussion of the place of envy in socialist thought, Schoeck (1969: 249) makes the following comments:

> *The various forms of socialism have always recruited a large proportion, if not the majority, of their important supporters and theoreticians from among those people who were deeply troubled by the problem of envy in society. These were mostly people in good, if not excellent, circumstances, who suffered from the idea*

> *that they gave cause for envy. Their concern was directed equally towards those who were envied like themselves and towards those who were envious. How acute this problem was to many socialists and communists is amply illustrated by their writings, especially their diaries, correspondence and autobiographies.*

Such is the association of envy with class politics that it would appear that Labour politicians in the UK are concerned to avoid any implications of either upward or downward envy. For example, New Labour has actively sought to distance itself from any charges that envy has influenced any of their policies. They have, for example, embraced entrepreneurship and have had little to say about 'fat cat' salaries lest they be accused of pursuing an old Labour politics of envy (Ahier and Beck, 2003). Judging from recent statements from Blair, little appears to have changed contemporarily. Thus, whilst Blair has now remarked that he does care 'about people who are without opportunity, disadvantaged and poor', this was not to be at the expense of 'hammering the people who are successful', i.e. those who earn large salaries (Wintour, 2005). This therefore begs a question. If envy is so closely associated with class politics to the extent that politicians feel the need to positively promote themselves as *not* pursuing or encouraging a politics of envy, how can we understand ideas about envy and egalitarianism at the level of everyday classed meanings? Are they similarly unspeakable?

To pursue this question, I first explore the distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. This is to demonstrate how the association of envy with outcome rather than opportunity raises a number of concerns. These rest on how, in the everyday, these terms are profoundly inter-related. This inter-relationship, I shall argue, means that there is always the potential for differential judgments to be made about whether one is simply envious or is expressing justified resentment. Such judgments draw on location in the social structure and indicate how we need to understand the attribution of envy and the attribution of a justified sense of injustice as part of broader moral concerns (Norman, 2002).

As I have noted, equality of opportunity is viewed as an entirely appropriate, even politically correct, policy to pursue. Thus Phillips (2004:2) refers to equality of opportunity as the 'mild-mannered alternative to the craziness of outcome equality'. Equality of outcome is perceived to be crazy because it is viewed as economically suspect in its leveling down propensities, denies individuals their freedom of choice and overrides innate differences. Each of these concerns also finds their expression in the negatively charged terrain of envy. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that there appears to be such a strong association between outcome equality and envy. Thus, envy and outcome equality are seen to lead to us all becoming poorer. They deny the hard work and choices that individuals have made over their lifetimes when using their equal opportunities to their best advantage by perceiving them as the outcome of good luck or fortune. However, envy suffers a double jeopardy. Whilst outcome equality may be perceived as madness, envy is economically and socially crazy and, furthermore, indicates moral bankruptcy.

Moreover, there is a tautological problem in the distinction between opportunity and outcome in that 'The principles and objectives of equal treatment are … conflated into an indivisible whole (Sevenhuijsen,1998: 42; see also Barry, 2005). Thus, we commonly rely on outcomes as evidence for the equality, or otherwise, of opportunity. Indeed, Lam's respondents draw intuitively on inequalities of outcome to provide evidence of inequalities of opportunity. For example, Lam notes how one of her respondents, Ming, was 'outraged about the under-representation of females as engineers while males nevertheless could be nurses' (p 16). Ming therefore uses the outcome measures of the numbers of women occupying posts as engineers, or the fact that men are employed as nurses, to support her argument that there is inequality of opportunity.

As Lam's study testifies, these tautological qualities of opportunity and outcome mean that, at the level of everyday discourse, it is no simple matter to distinguish between a politics of envy based on equality of outcome or one based on equality of opportunity. However, the moral imperatives of envy talk impact on what is discursively permissible. As Lucey et al (op cit) noted, it is very difficult to tell anyone about envious feelings. One may, therefore, be very careful about what is said and to whom it is said. Moreover, social divisions mark this discursive terrain. Here, we need to ask why Lam's respondents were not only able to express outrage at the horizontal and vertical segregation of the labour market but also what factors led to them being heard as legitimately doing so? In answer, we can say that Lam's respondents derive legitimacy for their outrage of inequalities because of a combination of gender and class. As middle class women, Lam's respondents draw on the cultural respectability of their classed position as enabling them to speak against injustices. They also draw on their classed sense of entitlement to the opportunities and rights of their brothers. In terms of gender politics, they are also able to draw on the successes that feminism, together with other social movements, have wrought. This combination of factors enables Lam's respondents to express rage both in respect of their own situation and in respect of the situations of others. Within the discourses of justification, such rage can clearly be identified as a sense of injustice in the terms set out by Rawls (1971) 'in distinguishing between resentment as a response to wrongs done to oneself, and indignation as a response to wrongs done to others' (Norman, 2002: 44).

Notwithstanding, differentially classed women and men may find their outrage read less as appropriate moral concern and more about innate envious potentials. Skeggs (2004: 113) notes that there has been a shift from defining class by economic classification 'to a return to strongly moralized positions'. This can be seen in the various representations of the working class 'as excess, as waste, as authenticating, as entertainment, as lacking in taste, as unmodern, as escapist, as dangerous, as unruly and without shame, and as always spatialized' (Skeggs, 2004: 99). Such representations with their ritualized humiliation and inferiorisation are, of course, familiar to those who are its objects as Charlesworth's (2000) study so apply demonstrates. Read within this hierarchical positioning of moral worth, and as concerns by New Labour about the politics of envy illustrate, working class expressions of injustice can too easily be understood as loaded with envy. Indeed, structurally positioned more readily as envier, than envied, these various representations of working class lack add their support to such readings. What else to do but envy rather

than take responsibility for one's own life choices? Within such a view, the assumed moral degeneracy of underclass proclivities enables a seemingly automatic attribution of envy. Further, as Sayer (2005b) notes, such assumed moral dispositions also act as legitimation for inequality.

The ways in which these disciplinary mechanisms render particular emotions and their associated moral meanings unspeakable can be seen in Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine's (2003) study of educational success amongst working class young women both at the level of the empirical data and in terms of Lucey et al's analytic commentary. Despite New Labour concerns for widening participation, class differentials in access to higher education continue to be a significant policy issue. Commonly, in these policy terms, access is understood as finessing exam success with university admissions practices. Less attention is paid to the psycho-social dimensions of class travel that are implied in working class entry to higher education. Research has, however, demonstrated the significance of this issue. This is both in terms of a desire to remain 'true' to one's working class roots (see for example Tett, 2000) and to a desire to use the opportunity of higher education as an escape route from working class life (see for example Jackson, 1998). Indeed, Reay (2005: 911) has called for sociologists to pay much greater attention to the psychic realm of class as too often these aspects of lived meanings 'are individualized, pushed out of the wider social picture'.

Lucey et al argue that 'if we are serious about the project of equality in education' (p 285), we need to explore the gains, and losses, for young working class women who are experiencing upward mobility through educational success. Lucey et al therefore explore what they describe as the more difficult dynamics of family life that sustain young working class women's educational success. Their analysis portrays parents as burdened, envious, loving and proud and one of their concerns is the envy generated when children have chances denied to their parents. Thus one mother commented:

> *'I must admit I get jealous sometimes, you know, and thinking, Cor I wish we'd had the chance to do that when we were younger' (p 291).*

What is interesting about this data is not so much the commentary by this mother but the form of analysis that Lucey et al undertake. Specifically, Lucey et al concur with the unspeakability of envy in that they comment on its irrationality, its links to aggressive feelings and how potentially dangerous such negative emotions are in terms of mother-daughter relations. Drawing on object relations theory, they comment:

> *The recognition that one might be the object of others' envy may not exist on a conscious rational level, precisely because it is so irrational to think that a parent with whom we share a loving relationship could harbour such negative feelings towards us. However, on an unconscious level, the fear that this envy may cause us to be the target of parents' aggressive feelings continues to operate and may in turn provoke our own aggression. (Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine, 2003: 291)*

Steedman (1986:112) reflects on how difficult it is to explore 'Feelings of exile and exclusion, of material and political envy' in frameworks of morality that are encompassed within such psychoanalytic theories. This is because, by rendering them as a negative quirk of psychological failings, they give no space to the legitimacy of such thoughts. It is such legitimacy that is of concern to Reay (2005) in her research on the affective realm of class envy in the school classroom. As part of a project that signals the importance, and costs, of the psychic economy of class, Reay's analysis highlights the 'links between individuals' inner emotional worlds and external social and structural processes' (p 923).

In bringing together the connections between the (commonly individualized) internalized and emotional meanings of envy with issues of class structure, both Steedman and Reay are indicating how envy can be understood as 'a product of systematic exclusion from things which are held valuable for all' (Sayer, 2005b: 140). In terms of the Lucey et al study, certainly the prohibitions of motherly love inhibit the expression of envy and raise the sense of guilt when so experienced. And, undoubtedly it can be uncomfortable to be the one who is envied. But what are the politics of representing working class mothers as envious and whose envy is likely to provoke aggressive responses if not to further reinforce the hierarchisation of this moral terrain? One could, and even perhaps should, analyse this mother's statement as a form of justified resentment. This would certainly be the case if we take account of class, gender and generation. In this way, the mother in Lucey et al's study is reflecting on the changing classed and gendered opportunities that are now available to young women and which were denied to her. Is this not sufficient for her to feel, even if only slightly, justifiably resentful?

Conclusions

This paper has explored the possibilities and problems for an articulation of envy in respect of understanding lay meanings of inequalities. Lam (2004) has provided the catalyst for this. As well as contributing to our understandings of older social resentments, the paper has sought to demonstrate how envy offers a useful analytic framework for exploring the emergence of new ones. Thus, whilst the forms of inequality that Lam and some of her respondents identified now appear perfectly legitimate areas for justice concerns, it remains important to chart the development of newer targets that may, or may not, be perceived in this way. These are not always articulated at the level of collective mobilisation. They are, however, discussed and experienced within the personal relations of the everyday. Accordingly, their inclusion allows us to recognise fluidity and change around mores of egalitarianism.

Ahier and Beck's (2003) identification of concerns about income differentials arising from returns for the same degree indicates something of this fluidity and change within the middle classes. Their analysis also highlights the significance of social proximity for the emergence of expressions of justified resentments. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that new social resentments sweep away concerns from an older order. Rather new social resentments also emerge in the ready made spaces of key social divisions. For example, Blaxter and Hughes (2005) indicate how benefits for women with children in

the workplace can be seen to present an unfair advantage over men. In this respect, gender divisions become the focus of concern as men perceive women have more rights than they do. However, mothers' rights are also the focus of other emergent social envies. These are between those with children and those without. In this sense, one can see that gender divisions may remain salient but another division, based on whether or not one has children, potentially becomes another.

Assessments over whether these concerns are expressions of legitimate or illegitimate resentments are entwined with moral judgments. And, albeit that the 'envy word' is banished from New Labour speak, through their 'Respect' agenda they are more broadly bringing 'the worlds of ethics and morals into relationship with those of politics and government' (Finlayson, 2005). This agenda focuses on the 'tyranny of a minority' included amongst whom are 'chaotic families', 'the person who spits at the old lady' and the 'few "problem families" from which so much of the disorder comes' (Blair, 2006). These are, of course, the very 'ChavScum' upon whom the 'envied' can project their discomfort and through whom they can maintain their envied status.

Presenting a populist discourse, Blair argues that the need for a 'Respect' agenda arises through lay sensibilities as 'the need to act comes from the pressing moral urgency of the people' (Blair, 2006). Whether in the party political or in the academic realm, one of the implications of this for an analysis of lay meaning is the tendency to unreflexively draw upon the normative masculine subject of enlightenment theory as the subject/object of analysis. Rawls (op cit) is a classic example. In consequence, the literature has paid too little attention to how major social divisions impact upon or shape people's experiences, assumptions and discourses of envy. Indeed, as I have noted, whilst Rawls (1971/1999) viewed 'envy proper' as rancorous and harmful, Steedman's (1986: 123) classed and gendered analysis indicates how a recognition of 'proper envy' is a necessary political step in acknowledging there are 'those who possess what one has been denied'. Of course, what is discursively permissible and discursively possible is not confined to the realm of envy. It is a more general phenomenon. As Sondell (1997: 213) notes in respect of North American representations of 'white trash':

> *In a culture that promotes storytelling and the confessional narrative to almost hyperbolic proportions, the fact that stories about impoverished whites have been virtually untellable suggest a profound collective anxiety about what such narratives might reveal. Lies, secrets, and jokes operate, after all, as a form of displacement – either in terms of the content of the story or the teller's feelings about that content.*

In this regard, this paper has explored the unspeakability of envy as both a general moral prohibition and in respect of the impact of differential social location. It has highlighted how these two aspects combine to render envy talk as discursively unlikely. This brings me to my final point. This is how social mores about envy can further impact upon the forms of analysis that researchers bring to bear on their data such that opportunities are missed for an analysis of 'justified resentments'. This latter point is significant more generally in respect of the call for attention to be paid to lay meaning as it reminds us that

the interpretation and representation of such meanings is never ‘pure’. Skeggs (1997) notes the ethical difficulties in asserting her right to overlay the claims of her respondents with her own analyses of their lives. Such a position draws on strong concerns with issues of power, voice and representation found within feminist methodologies and more recently within the reflexive turn in social research. In recovering the equality of social envies from everyday talk, the analyst has to be constantly mindful of their own lay proclivities as well as their representations of the legitimate and illegitimate of envious talk.

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